



Alma School District

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The scenic Great River Road, bordering the western edge of Wisconsin, winds through historic Alma. It is a town of about 800 people tucked between beautiful wooded bluffs and the mighty Mississippi River. This river town is about 45 minutes west of Eau Claire and 55 minutes north of LaCrosse.

Alma has two streets and is seven miles long. The school itself is a community, containing within its four walls the town's entire school-age population of 411 students; the district itself has 34 licensed instructional staff, three administrators, and six support staff. This rural school district consists mostly of white students (95.5%) with the remainder being Native American, Korean American, and African American students. About one-fourth of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches, an indicator of the economic mix of the community.

Alma's location was known as "Twelve-Mile Bluff" by riverboat pilots prior to its settlement in 1848. Current-day Alma reflects the "mirror of the past and the vision of the future." Yesteryear was also the good old railroad days; today, about 30 trains pass through daily. In the past, logging rafts, canoes, and river steamboats paddled by Alma; today, large barges, pleasure craft, and elegant steamboats can be seen. The school mascots are called the "Rivermen," providing a daily reminder of the community's link to the Mississippi River and its past.

Nestled within the bluffs and river, couched between the past and future, the Alma school provides a sense of continuity and respect—community at its best. The school is small, clean, and comfortable. Older and younger students mingle in the hallways and on the playground. Although class times are staggered to eliminate sudden surges in hallway traffic, students of all ages are comfortable around one another. In some respects, Alma is a modern-day one-room schoolhouse, with all its positive connotations.

Implementation Strategies

About 12 years ago, when alcohol use among young people in the district was high, the Alma School District invested (and continues to invest) significant time and resources into curriculum and student activities that promote health and wellness. The broad strategies described below were most influential in establishing the high priority the district currently gives such issues. Specific strategies will be described in more detail in the upcoming sections.

Funding Support

The Alma School District has made constructive use of available grant funds to systematically build its comprehensive school health program. These funds include federal Safe and Drugs Free Schools and Community Act (SDFSCA) entitlements and state funds administered by the Department of Public Instruction on a competitive basis (that is, State AODA Program and Student Mini-Grants). Two of the grants most influential in the district's current programs are:

Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma: District staff recall a time when youth drinking was a problem, with everyone waiting for someone else to take a leadership role to address it. Some students were feeling pressure to drink but did not want to succumb to it. In 1992, the district applied for a grant from the Alliance for a Drug Free Wisconsin to develop an organization that supported young people who wanted to engage in healthy behaviors instead of drinking. With the funding of that group, the Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma (YADFA) was born, and the district was able to send young people to a training workshop that taught them about AODA issues as well as leadership skills. Today, many young people are actively involved, taking leadership in creating programs and activities that support healthy lifestyles and decision making. The school administration identifies YADFA as the student group that has the greatest impact on overall school climate.

Safe and Drug Free Schools Personnel Training Grant: Alma was one of seven school district teams that participated in a two-year (1993-95) statewide Safe and Drug Free Schools Personnel Training Grant. The U.S. Department of Education awarded funding for this staff development initiative to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. During their participation, the Alma team became familiar with four fundamental principles from the *Guide to Curriculum Planning in Alcohol and Other Drug Programs* (DPI, 1992). They learned and used a curriculum development process that focused on integrating AODA prevention education across the curriculum; authentic assessment; and clearly articulated, measurable student outcomes. Finally, they learned and adopted methods of instruction that incorporate a constructivist theory of learning, including higher-order and critical-thinking strategies. As will be detailed in the section on Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, this curricular focus on alcohol and other drug abuse has expanded to other youth risk behaviors such as gang involvement, sexual activity, teen suicide, and other mental health issues.

District Leadership

For a small school district, Alma School does big things with strong community support for its programs. With leadership provided by the district administrator and school board support for the new vision and direction of the administra-

tion, the staff has been successful in advancing programs that promote resiliency and assets development. District leadership not only encourages the development and expansion of these programs but also becomes actively engaged. Administrative staff directly participate in trainings and community programs. For example, Lois Balk, the former elementary school principal, and Barbara Abraham, current elementary principal, were actively involved with classroom teachers on the Alma Drug Free Schools Personnel Training Grant team.

Gaining the Community's Trust

District staff say that gaining the trust of people in the community by bringing them in on the ground floor and building their respect was a key factor in creating the strong working relationship they now enjoy. Gaining the confidence of staff members and creating collaborative relationships within the schools is also critical to their success. One staff member said that it was better to start small and move slowly instead of crashing through with some grandiose program that did not adequately involve the community and staff. This required strong and frequent communication among staff, administrators, school board members, and other community residents.

This approach seems to be working well for the Alma schools. The district was invited to send a student and a staff person to the 1996 White House Leadership Conference on Youth Drug Use and Violence. The district was recognized for its YADFA program and the work it is doing to prevent youth violence. YADFA was also recognized in 1996 as one of the first recipients of the Wisconsin Exemplary Prevention Program Award.

Healthy School Environment

Alma student services staff have identified the following four components that add up to a healthy school environment:

school culture, which includes respecting other people's opinions and ideas;

physical infrastructure, which focuses on such issues as hallway upkeep, overall building hygiene, and structural integrity;

services, which include the availability of healthy foods in the vending machines, risk-management

issues, emergency/first-aid plans and procedures, and a strong relationship between school personnel and community health services; and

policies, which focus on building a continued strong working relationship with students, staff, and parents to jointly develop health and wellness policies, especially at the secondary level.

Respecting others was one of the district's major themes for the 1997-98 school year, with a special emphasis on respecting a person's right to be safe and free of sexual harassment. The school is also promoting responsibility for one's behaviors, to one's commitments, and to others. This includes parental responsibility for their children and their children's success in the school and in the community. A healthy and clean school, healthy diets, and physical health are key components of the health and wellness plan for Alma schools. Everyone, including staff, is encouraged to be responsible for maintaining the hygiene of the building and grounds. The district is working to promote healthy diets by having healthy choices in the vending machines. Staff is planning for first-aid, CPR, and crisis training for staff and students.

The Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma plays a critical role in developing a healthy school environment by helping to provide activities that promote healthy lifestyles and a caring community. More than 40 percent of the high school student population participates in one or more of these activities.

There is a call for even greater inclusion of students, staff, and parents in discussions on school policies. Staff is especially encouraging parental participation at the secondary level.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Prevention education is intricately interwoven into the entire academic and social curriculum throughout all grades at Alma. "It is the philosophy of the Alma School District," the Board of Education writes in the district's philosophy statement, "that our prevention education curriculum will be fully integrated into other areas of study at all grade levels. It will be infused into the regular curricular areas such as reading, science, and social studies by all teachers and not just health specialists. Logical connections will be made to other things that students are learning."

The integrated K-12 curriculum for health and wellness (also infused into foreign language and instrumental music) includes the youth risk behavior areas of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy; violence and safety; unhealthy diet; inactive lifestyle; and injuries and accidents. The curriculum is based on the four fundamental principles from the *Guide to Curriculum Planning in Alcohol and Other Drug Programs*.

- To varying degrees, people have the ability to influence and be influenced.
- Personal choices have consequences for oneself and for others.
- Society has a responsibility to set reasonable boundaries that are in the best interest of all members.
- Each person has the responsibility to promote the health and safety of oneself and others.

The curriculum identifies 15 broad health and wellness outcomes for all Alma students. It is divided into age-appropriate objectives by grade levels: K-3, 4-6, and 7-12. Using the four principles as a foundation, the objectives identify specific desired outcomes for each grade level.

For instance, under the category of "Influences," the K-3 objectives indicate that students will be able to acquire a basic understanding of: (1) how other people influence our attitudes and beliefs, including health issues; (2) how to compare different values concerning alcohol and other drugs; (3) how to utilize positive peer pressure to discourage the use of alcohol, drugs, gangs, and violence; and (4) how to determine the effect of the media on our perceptions of a healthy lifestyle.

For students in grades 4-6, the objectives aim at a higher level of comprehension in these areas. For example, instead of requiring a basic understanding of how others influence attitudes and beliefs, the objectives for grades 4-6 call for students to evaluate ways that others influence our attitudes, beliefs, and decisions (including health issues). The objectives also require students to do higher-order thinking such as comparing, describing, critiquing, and developing strategies.

Alma staff prefer a curriculum that demands higher-order thinking because it meets students at their respective cognitive levels. It also facilitates the integration of the health and wellness objectives throughout the academic curricula.

At the junior and senior high levels, objectives are integrated into a variety of courses, such as health and family and consumer education, as well as into extracurricular and co-curricular activities, such as the Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma and the high school Mentoring Program (see Student Programs).

Pupil Services

The district employs a school psychologist and a K-12 guidance counselor; in addition Buffalo County Health and Human Services provides a nurse who works two days a week in the school. The Pupil Services Team consists of the school psychologist; the K-12 guidance counselor; the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Abuse (ATODA) Coordinator; and the elementary as well as grades 7-12 administrators. Although the school nurse is not a formal member of the team, she is involved informally in a majority of the decisions. This team interacts with the Student Assistance Program (SAP) co-coordinators, who are also classroom teachers, on health and wellness program development and implementation. The team works with classroom teachers and students to develop annual goals and objectives such as "improving respect for others," one of the major goals for the 1997-98 academic year. Team members also work with students to help them plan activities that focus on the annual goals. In addition, the Pupil Services Team provides leadership on school-community connections and parent involvement.

Student Programs

Alma School has a variety of health and wellness student activities throughout grades K-12. It uses a combination of resiliency/assets development and risk behavior reduction strategies. The Student Assistance Program is available in all grades and addresses the issues of ATOD, violence and safety, unhealthy diet, inactive lifestyle, and injuries and accidents. The Peer Mentor program focuses on ATOD, violence and safety, and inactive lifestyle for all grades while narrowing its focus to the middle and high school for unhealthy diet. The Advisor/Advisee program is available at the middle and high schools for all risk behavior areas. Students in all grades also have access to clubs that provide activities promoting healthy lifestyles, exercise, cooperation, and alternatives to drinking alcohol and using other drugs.

The Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma

The Youth Alliance for a Drug Free Alma (YADFA) is an in-school and after-school organization that combines the outside community with student-led projects in an effort to curb drug and alcohol use. For example, a small group of YADFA students initiated dialogue with the coaches, other school staff, social-service providers, juvenile court officers, and the sheriff to express their concern with consistency regarding AOD violations. Because of these discussions, the Buffalo County Partnership Council began working with the local judge to develop a Youth Risk Reduction Program.

Any student in grades 7-12 may be a member of the organization, and about 10 percent of students take advantage of this opportunity. Students gain leadership skills through project development, marketing, implementation, and evaluation. Dances, community fairs, and other projects build student and community strengths, providing healthy alternatives to self-defeating behaviors of drug and alcohol use. YADFA also sponsors community dinners and panel discussions focusing on community issues. (See the discussion of Family and Community Town Suppers in the section on Family and Community Connections.)

Student Assistance Program

The Student Assistance Program (SAP) group meets weekly for students in grades K-6 in 10-week sessions led by trained staff facilitators. In grades 7-12, SAP groups are established for each semester. Seventy-two students in grades 1-6 and 30 students in grades 7-12 currently participate in the SAP program.

The main goal of the K-12 SAP is to help students identify problems and solutions in their own lives. SAP is continually gaining support from administration, staff, and the community, and a significant majority of the staff has been trained as SAP facilitators.

The After School Rap Session and Advisor-Advisee Program

These programs provide students with the opportunity to discuss issues that are troubling them and to offer advice and friendship to others who are experiencing difficult situations at home, in the community, or within the school. Students participate across grade levels, with sixth grad-

ers involved with students in grades K-5. Resiliency and natural support systems are stressed in each program. Sixty-two students in grades 1-6 and 11 students in grades 7-12 (comprising nearly 20 percent of the student population) participate in the After School Rap Session and Advisor/Advisee groups. Thirteen parent volunteers (a ratio of one parent to each five or six students) also share their skills and time with the groups.

Mentoring Program

The mentoring program provides an opportunity for students of different ages and skills to spend time together in a positive environment. Trained high school students, who are likely to be regarded as natural experts by younger students, serve as mentors.

Adult Programs

Staff Development

Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA 4) provides substantial services to Alma School District educators through training and cooperative programming efforts. CESA 4 has assisted in grant development and writing, inservice education, and training. The Alma School District subsequently received several student mini-grants through CESA 4 and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. In addition, middle and high school teaching staff have worked with CESA staff on an ongoing revision of the health and wellness curriculum.

Other staff development and training has focused on risk behavior reduction in the areas of ATOD, HIV/STD and pregnancy, violence and safety, nutrition, inactive lifestyle, and injuries and accidents.

In addition to risk behavior reduction training, Alma schools have encouraged their staff to seek training as SAP facilitators so that they are available to students seeking adult support. This provides a way for staff not only to teach about risk reduction but also to promote assets development in the school by encouraging healthy attitudes and behaviors. The vast majority of staff (80%) are trained as facilitators, with about half the staff actively involved with groups.

Other Programs

Other adult-oriented programs include child development and parenting classes. The child de-

velopment classes are also available to youth, creating a teen-parent connection. Programs include:

Child Development Day: This is an opportunity to teach parents and students about children's developmental needs and ways to meet those needs.

Teen Health Day: This serves a similar purpose for parents of teens, as well as including information for teens themselves.

Parenting Classes and Newsletter: These provide continuous home-school contact while broadening education to areas outside of the classroom.

Family and Community Connections

Alma School District staff and interested parents have worked together over the past 12 years to create community and school activities that promote healthy lifestyles for young people. They have also engaged the broader community in dialogue over one of the most important issues identified by both school staff and parents as critical to young people's future success: youth alcohol use.

Improving America's Schools Act School-Community Advisory Council

Alma school staff and administrators work with the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) Team to address emerging student issues and to provide support to children and families in times of need. The IASA Team includes some members of the Pupil Services Team, the district administrator, other administrative staff, teachers, parents, the school nurse, a representative from the Buffalo County Department of Health and Human Services, a school board member, the Alma chief of police, and a nurse from St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

The IASA Team, first organized in the spring of 1995, works toward achieving three major goals. First, they review progress made on meeting the state and school district goals to raise achievement of all children in the core academic subjects. Second, they review the contribution of federal programs to the progress made by the beneficiaries of those programs in achieving state and school district goals. Third, they help schools use federal resources to support general education reform as well as to plan, implement, and modify

specific strategies and activities (including health and wellness activities). The advisory council meets formally twice a year to discuss both emerging and on-going issues as well as strategies relating to individual students. In addition, the team has several informal meetings throughout the year.

Among the issues the team has addressed are: (1) a four-year-old preschool program, (2) parental involvement via parenting classes and parent volunteers, (3) assessment, and (4) staff development. Two major strategies have been used to provide students and their families with support. First, the Buffalo County Department of Health and Human Services has promoted attendance at school parenting classes. Second, asset-building breakfast and dessert meetings with parents and the community have been offered to determine how the school, community, and families can work together to increase asset building for students and youth.

Buffalo County Partnership Council

The community of Alma and the Alma School District are active partners in the Buffalo County Partnership Council (BCPC). This council is one of the key players in the CESA 4 partnerships. The BCPC is composed of representatives from each school district in Buffalo County, the Sheriff's Office, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, and Buffalo County Health and Human Services. A unique aspect of the BCPC is that each school district provides three student representatives who have full voting privileges.

The council promotes collaborative activities that focus on such health and wellness issues as youth risk behavior factors for middle and junior high students and enforcing current athletic codes. It also plans and promotes activities that address the other youth risk behaviors identified above, including HIV/STD and pregnancy prevention, safety and violence prevention, healthy diet and active lifestyle, and injuries and accident prevention.

The group is currently meeting with the superintendents, high school principals, parents, and students to make sure everyone is fully aware of the regulations stated in the athletic codes. The Alma School District expects that students will take a leadership role in addressing this issue. District staff view students as more effective in communicating the no-use messages than are teachers and other adults.

Family and Community Town Suppers

One significant strategy implemented over the last few years is the Family and Community Town Suppers (FACTS). FACTS bring together students, families, and other community members in an intergenerational setting to discuss over a meal a major topic of interest to the community. Subjects have included media influences on the use of alcohol and other drugs, what can be done to stop the legalization of marijuana in Wisconsin, and helping parents address alcohol and other drug use issues. Participants in the panel discussions have included the Buffalo County judge, Buffalo County sheriff and/or deputies, the Alma police chief, a physician, the district attorney, local legislators, the Alma School District administrator, grade-level principals, a member of the DPI Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team, and students.

The district has now held three FACTS events and was surprised when 125 attendees came to the first event. The numbers then increased to 180 for the second, and sharply jumped to 270 for the third FACTS. According to staff accounts, members of the LaCrosse media were absolutely stunned by the attendance when they entered the crowded room.

Community Awareness Group

The Community Awareness Group is made up of parents and local community leaders from the faith community, civic organizations, and government. It promotes school activities designed to support students interested in alternative activities to drinking and other high-risk youth behaviors.

Other Community Connections

Alma also has a police-school liaison officer who teaches the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program to sixth graders. The officer participates with school staff and officials in addressing such issues as ATOD, violence prevention, and improved safety as well as injury and accident prevention.

The district collaborates with community organizations and agencies to provide activities and programs that support health and character development in the community and school. The "Character Counts" Committee closely examines school and community needs and develops special programming to meet those needs. The committee

also uses natural learning situations to emphasize community values.

A final connection is with the area volunteer fire department and emergency medical services crew. These community people instruct students, parents, and other community members about fire and health safety.

Future Directions

The district's future plans include writing a grant proposal that will fund a communitywide examination of its developmental assets, an approach originating from Peter Benson and the Search Institute. Five different breakfast and/or dessert events are being held in an effort to study the developmental assets and gather input about how to promote these assets in the broader Alma community. Community people who have been invited include Buffalo County Health and

Human Services staff, local and county law enforcement, business people, clergy, and parents.

The Alma School District will focus more of its efforts toward establishing stronger support for parents and a stronger connection with the business community, according to district staff. The YADFA program is strong, and youth involvement continues to increase. With this success, school staff will turn their attention to helping parents learn more about child development and how to manage challenging behaviors. They also intend to increase awareness of the ways that parents and school staff can better collaborate to support their children in school as well as in the community.

More grant funding for program development and expansion is an aspect of the school district's plans. Finally, Alma will continue to involve young people in the grant and program development process.